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### The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia

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# The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia

GRIGORII V. GOLOSOV

IN THE PERIOD 2005–2007, RUSSIA'S POLITICAL regime transformed from what had been sometimes referred to as a 'managed democracy' (Balzer 2003), a political regime that restrained the scope of citizens' political choice by a variety of manipulative means, to a different political order. From a theoretical angle, this transition can be viewed as crossing a threshold between two hybrid political regimes: 'defective democracy' and 'electoral authoritarianism' (Diamond 2002; Bogaards 2009). Defective democracy, sometimes referred to as electoral democracy when contrasted to full-fledged liberal democracy, does not go beyond the electoral minimum. While being capable of 'getting elections right', defective democracy fails to institutionalise other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation (Schedler 2002, p. 37). Electoral (competitive) authoritarian regimes are different in that they fail to meet even minimum standards of free and fair elections, but non-free elections, unlike in some other varieties of authoritarianism (Linz 2000), remain the principal source of regime legitimacy (Levitsky & Way 2002). At the same time, they do not perform a function that is more important and indeed defining for democracy, the transfer of power. If alteration in power occurs, the underlying mechanisms involve not only elections but rather multidimensional processes of political change (Bunce & Wolchik 2010, p. 43; Brownlee 2007). To ensure its capability for preventing such processes, electoral authoritarianism employs a variety of techniques, from outright fraud to more sophisticated means of placing all actors in the electoral arena under more or less direct control of the executive (Elklyt & Svensson 1997).

Similarly to what happens today in many countries of the world, and in contrast to the 'uncommon democracies' of the past (Pempel 1990), Russia's electoral authoritarianism restricts the freedoms of association and speech, monopolises the media, and employs unfair electoral practices to an extent that deprives elections of their primary functions of political choice and elite circulation, and reduces them to a mere tool of legitimisation and mobilisation of support (Gill 2006; Hassner 2008;

McFaul & Stoner-Weiss 2008). The central argument of this essay is that centre-periphery relations played a crucial role in the making of this new political order. It is argued that electoral authoritarianism was not the only possible exit from the system of defective democracy. The early political agenda of Vladimir Putin included several potentially progressive elements, such as an attempt to restore the nation's political unity after a decade of authoritarian decentralisation, and an effort to create institutional conditions for a viable party system, the lack of which impeded Russia's democratisation (Riggs & Schraeder 2005). In the long run, such policies could have provided a basis for truly democratic development. Thus the authoritarian choice made by the Russian leadership was not predetermined. The components of the possible democratic solution were already in place, but they were rejected to clear the way for authoritarianism. While the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004 was a major threshold, the making of electoral authoritarianism involved many more political and institutional modifications. These modifications, placed in a broad historical retrospective, are the focus of this study.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Elections and regional politics in the 1990s*

When the anti-communist coalition led by Boris Yel'tsin came to power in 1991, it rejected the idea of holding fresh elections to legitimise and consolidate regime change (McFaul 2001). This choice, however justified by the necessity to accelerate economic reform, was detrimental for Russia's democratic development. In particular, the chance was missed to launch party system institutionalisation in the relatively favourable conditions that were in place after the collapse of communist rule. At the subnational level, the lack of elections crucially contributed to the preservation and consolidation of old bureaucratic elites and to the demise of the organisational legacies of the *perestroika*-era pro-democracy movement (Flikke 2004). True, the moratorium on holding subnational elections was selective, as it did not apply to Moscow, St Petersburg and the republics; but, while in the federal cities mayoral elections did return the representatives of pro-reform forces, in the majority of republics presidential elections only reinforced the positions of those old power-holders who were already in control as the chairpersons of the Supreme Soviets of the republics (Matsuzato 2001). The development of other regions heavily depended on the choices made by Boris Yel'tsin when he exercised his right, delegated to him by the Congress of People's Deputies, to appoint the heads of administrations. In some of the regions, the appointees were taken from the old *nomenklatura* ranks. In other regions, Yel'tsin appointed his loyalists from the democratic movement who often lacked a significant political capital of their own. Only in a few cases, such as in Nizhny Novgorod and Novgorod provinces, did this not lead to conflicts between the new power-holders and the majorities in the regional soviets, often supported by

<sup>1</sup>The sources of the electoral statistics used in this analysis are the internet database of the Central Election Commission of Russia (<http://www.izbirkom.ru>) and the Russian Electoral Statistics database (<http://db.irena.org.ru>), both accessed June 2009–July 2010.

the municipal authorities (Gel'man *et al.* 2003). The soviets were dissolved in the autumn of 1993, but the conflicts re-emerged after the new regional legislative assemblies were elected in 1994. The overall situation in the country was not favourable for the Yel'tsin appointees. Quite the reverse, their rivals continued to enhance their electoral potential. Under such circumstances Yel'tsin, who faced the prospect of running in the 1996 presidential election, was reluctant to allow direct gubernatorial elections since, in many regions, his appointees were quite unlikely to win.

Meanwhile, the 1995 *Duma* campaign, and later the 1996 presidential campaign, clearly demonstrated that the regional authorities were pivotal in determining the political outcomes of national elections in their regions. Yet to make these results favourable for the federal centre, they had to combine political loyalty with local managerial efficiency, which was a rare combination in mid-1990s Russia. Thus the old model of centre–periphery relations clearly exhausted itself, and direct gubernatorial elections were an obvious alternative. Yel'tsin's appointees did not fare well in these elections. In the 88 gubernatorial elections held between 1995 and 1999, they won only 45 of the 84 in which they participated. The overall number of successful challengers was 39 (elections in Chechnya not included). The challengers often came to power with the support of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsiya*, KPRF), or its umbrella coalition, the Popular Patriotic Union of Russia (*Narodno-patrioticheskii soyuz Rossii*) (Solnick 1998). However, these affiliations were not necessarily important for their success. Far more importantly, by the time of the elections, they were already winners in the intra-elite struggles in the regions. In this way, the mid-1990s gubernatorial elections effectively performed the same function as the early 1990s presidential elections in the republics, the function of consolidating regional regimes. Moreover, the levels of consolidation in those regions where the challengers came to power were normally higher than in those where the Yel'tsin-appointed incumbents remained in office. First, the challengers often emerged from the regional legislatures, thus being in control of the legislative branch even before they won executive leadership. Second, their protracted political warfare against the incumbents supplied them with the organisational means of electoral mobilisation that remained underdeveloped in those regions where political conflicts were absent or inchoate. Third, some of them enjoyed overwhelming local popularity, which made their own political affiliations transferrable into the preferences of the subject populations. For instance, Aman Tuleev's alliance with the KPRF was clearly a crucial factor in boosting the party's support in the 1995 *Duma* elections to nearly 50% of the vote.

Thus the political processes of the second half of the 1990s unified regional elites (Melvin 1998) and bred consolidated political regimes in the majority of the regions. Most of them were authoritarian from the beginning (Ross 2005), even from before regime consolidation (Kirkow 1995). In those regions where the Yel'tsin appointees survived in office, they considered their reconfirmed mandate as a sanction to uproot what remained of the opposition; but when the regional oppositionists came to power, they were able to govern without facing any opposition in turn: the electoral defeats of the incumbents led not only to their complete elimination from the political arenas, but also, not infrequently, to their physical withdrawal from the region together with

their loyal clients. Authoritarianism was especially deeply entrenched in the ethnic republics where the 'electoral machines', thoroughly controlled by the local executives and capable of delivering electoral success to their clients, started to develop already in the first half of the 1990s (Hale 2003). An important peculiarity of the authoritarian regional regimes of that period, irrespective of their political origins, was their significant political isolation from the federal centre. While their leaders did display political loyalty, which was almost equally characteristic of the former Yel'tsin appointees and the former challengers, they considered loyalty as a price for the almost complete withdrawal of the federal centre from the internal affairs of the regions. Loyalty, of course, was not merely symbolic. Rather, it meant the willingness of the regional authorities to deliver national election results to whatever federal-level political force they considered effectively, or prospectively, held power. This was epitomised by the 1999 *Duma* elections, in which the electoral support of the two rival 'parties of power'—Unity (*Edinstvo*) and Fatherland—All Russia (*Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya*)—was to a significant extent derived from the differentiated loyalties of governors (Sakwa 2000). Strikingly, Fatherland—All Russia was successful unexceptionally in those regions where it was supported by the governors. Many of these regions were republics of the Volga basin and North Caucasus. From the point of view of national campaigning, the 1999 *Duma* elections were probably the freest elections ever held in post-communist Russia, with unconstrained electoral entry, a relative oligopoly in the media, and clearly defined alternatives. Yet the authoritarian character of the underlying subregional structures weighed heavily on the electoral outcome.

#### *Putin's first term: an attempt at non-authoritarian centralisation*

The system inherited by Vladimir Putin from Boris Yel'tsin can be described as 'authoritarian decentralisation', with the federal centre serving as a weak national superstructure built upon a variety of subnational authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, this system epitomised Russia's failure at nation-state building. On the other hand, and by extension, it also epitomised the failure of Russia's transition to democracy because, without a viable nation state there is no democracy (Stepan 2000). Probably, the former aspect was from the very beginning more important for Putin. When delivering his first annual address to the Federal Assembly in July 2000, Putin argued that 'regional autonomy is often understood as an approval of state disintegration . . . I must emphasize that what we have had, what we have created is a decentralized state' (Putin 2000). Putin suggested several measures to fix the situation. One of them was to create seven federal districts to provide the coordination of federal agencies in the regions, and to eliminate the then-glaring discrepancies between the federal and regional legislation (Petrov & Slider 2006). These measures, however progressive or at least well intentioned, were unable to alter the course of regional politics fundamentally. Moreover, it was in the first half of the 2000s that the consolidation of regional authoritarian regimes entered its final stage. Namely, these regimes managed to solve three major problems inherited by them from the 1990s. First, in the vast majority of regions the main economic assets fell under the direct or indirect control of the ruling groups (although normally this did not prevent them

from co-operating, on mutually profitable conditions, with Moscow-based financial and industrial groups). Second, regional legislative assemblies were ultimately deprived of any political influence. Third, federal political parties were ultimately sidelined at the regional level.

The second and third aspects were closely interrelated. The residual autonomy of the regional legislatures from the executive was largely based on the presence of groups of deputies representing federal political parties, most often but not necessarily the KPRF (Golosov 1999). This was a situation inherited by the regions from the relatively competitive electoral politics of the mid-1990s, yet in the regional legislative elections of the early 2000s, loyalty to the governor became the predominant, if not the only, factor of electoral success. Party affiliations, in contrast, were not helpful in any possible sense. Indeed, the governors themselves were not affiliated to parties. Even if they came to power with the support of the communists or wider left-wing coalitions, they had little reason for loyalty already in the 1990s, and even less in the early 2000s when the KPRF stood in opposition not to deeply unpopular Yel'tsin, but to popular Putin. Of course, the governors' aversion to party affiliations was rooted not only in political considerations but also in a merely pragmatic desire to keep good working relations with the federal centre. It is therefore not surprising that the average share of party nominees in regional legislative assemblies dropped from 21.8% in the second half of the 1990s to 14.2% in the first half of the 2000s. In effect, political parties in the regions were on the edge of extinction (Hutcheson 2003; Golosov 2004; Hale 2006). The governors themselves normally avoided party nomination but this did not hinder their electoral success. Of 88 gubernatorial elections held in the period 1999–2003, incumbents won in 59, did not run in 13 and lost only in 16. The relatively large share of elections in which the incumbents abstained from running (in comparison with the previous period) is characteristic in itself. In the first half of the 2000s disqualification from elections was, in fact, the only tool at hand for the federal centre to make power change in the regions possible (Moraski & Reisinger 2007). For instance, Aleksandr Rutskoi in Kursk province was disqualified by the court on formal grounds, even though his chances of gaining re-election were generally considered to be overwhelming; and the powerful governor of Primorskii territory, Evgenii Nazdratenko, could only be removed from office by appointing him as the head of a federal agency in Moscow. Yet even in such cases, a change in power did not necessarily lead to outcomes favoured by the Kremlin. In Kursk province, the then-communist Aleksandr Mikhailov won a sweeping victory, as did a shadowy businessman Sergei Dar'kin in Primorskii territory. Neither of these individuals were the Kremlin's preferred candidates. However, despite such cases when the incumbent governors lost power the general tendency was for governors not to lose elections. Even if they were in vulnerable positions because of the federal centre's aversion to them, they were still able to eliminate most viable opponents. The trick known in Russia as the 'Bashkir technology', the disqualification of viable challengers from running in elections, became most widespread in the first half of the 2000s.

Thus the federal reform did not supply the centre with effective means of influencing regional politics, even though it was to some extent instrumental, as testified by the Kursk case. The lack of more efficient solutions remained apparent, which initiated a

search for political means of managing centre–periphery relations. In particular, national political parties were viewed as a mechanism that allowed for an ‘opening’ of regional political regimes if not to their populations, then to the federal centre (Golosov 2004). It seems that the Kremlin strategists expected national political parties to minimise the uncertainty of electoral outcomes and thereby the political risks of the federal power-holders. Yet these tasks could not be solved without taking the territorial dimension of party politics into account. Indeed, the Communist Party’s vast territorial network was customarily considered as a crucial factor of its success. While the ‘parties of power’ lacked territorial penetration, they heavily relied on the support of the governors, so that their fragmentation in the electorate in 1999 was a consequence of the varying political orientations of the regional authorities. Under these conditions, the choice of the federal centre was to offer a ‘stimulus package’ for the development of political parties that, while being capable of wide-scale territorial penetration, would be controlled at the federal, rather than the regional level. The central element of that package was the new law on political parties adopted in June 2001. The law set two major organisational goals that had to be passed by an organisation seeking the status of a political party. First, it had to have branches in more than half of Russia’s regions. Second, its overall membership had to be no less than 10,000, on the condition that in no less than half of the regions it formed branches of no less than 100 members. Only after complying with these (and several other) requirements could an organisation be registered as a political party, thus becoming eligible for running its candidates in federal and regional elections. This eligibility was exclusive. The law eliminated the notion of subnational political organisations, leaving some space for them only at the municipal level of elections. However, individual candidates retained the possibility of running as independents, as self-nominees.

The new law did not, however, solve the major problem of party development in the regions, which was low demand for political parties both among the elites and in the mass electorates. The simplest way to enhance the demand was to make it obligatory for the regions to use party-list proportional representation (PR) electoral systems in regional legislative elections (Golosov 2003). Indeed, party-list PR is the only electoral system that makes party affiliation, if not unavoidable, then highly useful for winning office. Moreover, the experience of the national *Duma* elections clearly demonstrated that even with the outlet for independent candidacy in the form of self-nomination in single-member districts, mixed electoral systems still placed party nominees at a strategic advantage, leading both to the proliferation of party nominees and to the staffing of party factions with those independents who managed to enter the *Duma*. In 2002, the law ‘On the basic guarantees of citizens’ electoral rights and the right to vote in referenda’<sup>2</sup> was amended to provide for the election of no less than half of the deputies in the regional legislature, or one of its chambers, by party-list PR (Moses 2003). The adoption of the amendment was difficult, as it was obviously viewed with

<sup>2</sup>Federal’nyi zakon ot 12 iyunya 2002 goda No 67-FZ ‘Ob osnovnykh garantiyakh izbiratel’nykh prav i prava na uchastie v referendume grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, available at: [http://www.cikrf.ru/law/federal\\_law/zakon\\_02\\_67fz\\_n.html](http://www.cikrf.ru/law/federal_law/zakon_02_67fz_n.html), accessed 15 December 2010.

anxiety by the regional elites. Partly as a result of regional resistance, the implementation of the new rules was delayed to December 2003.

*The making and unmaking of regional democracy*

The relative success of the United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*) party in December 2003 was to a large extent a product of the efforts of governors who joined the list of the ‘party of power’, thus accepting political responsibility for its performance at the polls. Yet the critical test of the efficiency of the new model was to come with its implementation in regional politics. The early experience was encouraging for the federal centre. The 13 regional legislative elections held in December 2003 and March 2004 produced results very similar to those of the 2003 *Duma* elections. The average share of the vote received by United Russia was 46.2%, the KPRF, 13.8%, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (*Liberal'no Demokraticeskaya Partiya Rossii*, LDPR), 8.0%, with all other parties jointly gaining 25.6% of the vote. As much as 11.4% of the votes were lost by voters casting invalid ballots and voting ‘against all’. Many votes were cast for parties that did not cross the established legal thresholds of representation. This waste of votes helped United Russia, as the leading party, to increase its seat share quite noticeably. In addition, United Russia outperformed other parties in plurality districts. As a result, its average seat share, 55.6%, was much greater than the level of support in the electorate, which was quite a comfortable result. Yet already in the autumn of 2004 the system that seemed so promising started to malfunction, as it seemed from the perspective of the federal centre. In the 19 regional legislative elections held between October 2004 and May 2005, the average share of the vote for United Russia dramatically decreased to 28.4%, the performance of the KPRF improved to 16.1% of the vote, while the vote share of the LDPR remained almost unchanged at 8.5%. More successful in these elections were minor parties that jointly took 31.4% of the vote, while the average share of the vote lost by spoiling ballots and voting ‘against all’ rose dramatically to 17.0% (Golosov 2006b). While the decline of United Russia’s electoral support was partly compensated by electoral arrangements that disproportionately increased its legislative seat shares (Golosov 2006a), in some of the regions it failed to become a majority party.

In order to understand the dynamics of party support in the 2003–2005 regional legislative elections, it is useful to disaggregate the category of other parties. Very successful were the parties that almost completely abstained from electoral participation before the autumn of 2004, Motherland (*Rodina*) and the Russian Pensioners’ Party (*Rossiiskaya Partiya Pensionerov*, RPP). Motherland was created in March 2004 on the basis of one of the parties that participated in the success of the Motherland electoral bloc in the 2003 *Duma* elections, the Party of Russian Regions. With the approval of the Russian authorities, the party inherited not only the name of the bloc but also a popular leader, Dmitrii Rogozin. The rise of RPP, whose main function in the 2003 elections was merely to split the communist vote, started in the spring of 2004 after it obtained a new leader, Valerii Gartung. In the course of several months, Gartung managed to supply this previously weak formation both with an appealing ideological message, also largely derived from the 2003 rhetoric of the Motherland bloc, and with a small yet highly efficient regional network. Surprisingly

to many observers, these two left-leaning formations were joined by the Union of Right Forces (*Soyuz Pravykh Sil*), a party that not only had tended to abstain from regional elections in the past, but also, due to its ideological standing, was generally viewed as unpromising in regional politics. One of the reasons for this sudden success was that, at that time, the Union of Right Forces was joined by an efficient campaign manager from Sverdlovsk province, Anton Bakov, previously a non-communist leftist. The message delivered in the regional campaigns organised by Bakov was that by building Western-style capitalism, the right would be able to achieve the Western level of social protection, including higher pensions and decent salaries for state employees. This message proved to be attractive to the regional electorates, as a result of which the lists of the party were successful in several regions where the pro-market forces had never fared well before, such as Amur province (with 12.7% of the vote), Kurgan province (10.7%) and Bryansk province (8.3%).

The most significant threat to United Russia was, however, posed not by these minor parties but by electoral blocs, especially if they were created with the support of the governors (Kynev 2009). In Amur province United Russia lost regional legislative elections to the bloc named 'We Are For the Development of Amur Province' (*My-Za Razvitie Amurskoi Oblasti*), in Sakhalin province to the bloc 'Our Motherland Is Sakhalin and Kuril Islands' (*Nasha Rodina-Sakhalin i Kurily*), and in Khakasiya it only marginally outperformed the bloc '*Khakasia*'. In accordance with the federal legal requirements, the formal founders of such blocs were the local branches of various small parties, but the regional populations often remained unaware of their existence. The important features of the blocs were that they appealed to local sentiment, often received direct endorsement from the governors, used the political resources of the governors in their campaigns, and therefore effectively operated as local 'parties of power'. For the governors themselves, sponsoring the blocs did not necessarily mean challenging United Russia but rather, that they kept their options open. The outright majority of United Russia in the regional assembly was unproblematic only to those regional leaders who, like Mintimer Shaimiev in Tatarstan and Murtaza Rakhimov in Bashkortostan, kept the regional branches of the party under their unrestricted control. Many governors lacked such political resources, and for them, it was more expedient to deal with fragmented legislatures, thus being able to perform arbitration between a variety of rival factions none of which was ultimately in control of the legislative agenda. Thus the strategy of the governors was quite rational. It was pursued not only explicitly, in the form of sponsoring the electoral blocs, but also by making deals with minor parties. In many cases, the success of the Union of Right Forces and the RPP resulted not only from their efficient campaigning, but also from their leaders' ability to demonstrate that after winning assembly seats they would co-operate with the governor.

After providing support for United Russia in the *Duma* elections, the governors had little incentive to carry on with the burden of party discipline. This was clearly demonstrated by the 45 gubernatorial elections held between the autumn of 2003 and February 2005 where the candidates from United Russia were nominated only in four, only two of these candidates were incumbent governors, and one of them lost. Even if endorsed by United Russia, the incumbent governors preferred to run as independents (self-nominees); yet the overall survival rate of the incumbents in these elections was

quite impressive. They gained re-election in 31 regions, did not run in nine, and lost only in five. In other words, the governors remained almost invincible. Even in those exceptional cases when they lost, the successful challengers were often not those preferred by the Kremlin. The widest publicity was attracted by such a clear-cut outsider as the comedian, Mikhail Evdokimov, in Altai territory, but in three other regions, Arkhangelsk, Pskov and Ryazan provinces, the incumbents lost to the challengers whose relations with the federal authorities were strained to neutral at best. These outcomes were decided by the voters, not by the strategists of the presidential administration.

However, this does not mean that the administrative and political reforms of the first half of the 2000s made no difference. Rather, in December 2003 regional politics in Russia did indeed enter a new stage that, in the long run, promised a progressive transformation. Of course, it was unrealistic to expect that the superior political resources of the governors, accumulated by them in the course of a decade, could disappear overnight as a mere reaction to institutional engineering, yet for the first time, truly multiparty legislatures started to emerge in the regions, and some of them, similarly to what happened in the first half of the 1990s, were hubs for the consolidation of the nascent political oppositions. The next cycle of gubernatorial elections could therefore bring about an entirely new constellation of regional political forces, with the incumbents being challenged not by the outsiders but by within-system politicians entrenched in the assemblies, yet, in contrast to what happened in the 1990s, also linked to major national political parties. The long-term mechanism for this transformation was already in place, but in the middle of the 2000s, it was suddenly and brutally broken.

#### *Authoritarian reaction*

In order to understand the authoritarian reaction, it is useful to examine the motives that drove the reforms of the early 2000s. They had little to do with normative commitment to democracy. While real and potentially constructive, the elements of democratisation in the early policies of Putin were not the end in themselves, but rather a means of achieving the much more important goal of placing the regions under the firmer control of the federal centre (Lankina 2009). This goal was crucial for the ruling group, with the major lesson learned from the 2003–2004 electoral campaigns being that only under such control could the regions be expected to deliver desirable electoral outcomes in the future. Clearly, United Russia was expected to perform even better than in 2003, if only to prepare solid grounds for the insider candidate in the presidential election. From this perspective, a situation in which the governors could afford to co-operate with different parties was utterly unacceptable. Instead, the Kremlin needed a system in which the governor would be linked to United Russia alone. This was the rationale for the mechanism of gubernatorial appointment that was adopted by the State *Duma*, on the urging of Putin, in the autumn of 2004. While endowing the President of Russia with the exclusive right to nominate governors, this system also requires the confirmation of appointment by the regional legislature (Goode 2007). One of the quite transparent results is that the strategy of manoeuvring among many minor factions in the assembly becomes too risky to be adopted by the governors. They need a majority faction and, given that the president is

the primary mover in the process, it could be only the faction created by the pro-president party, the party of power.

While seemingly restrictive against the governors, the new system was accepted without objection by all of them. One reason was situational: at that time, a significant number of governors had already been elected twice in a row, which made re-election under the acting constitutions and by-laws of the regions impossible. With the new order of appointment, this threat to their political survival disappeared. Of course, this order was associated with some risks too, if only because the Kremlin could have opted for a wide-scale purge of the governors. The probability of such a radical solution was, however, negligible. Indeed, the governors could be expected to deliver the vote in the regions only if they used the whole scale of resources accumulated by them both on the road to power and in office, and from this angle, replicating Yel'tsin's experience of the early 1990s was scarcely an attractive strategy for the Kremlin. In the period 2005–2007, the cases when the President of Russia refused to reappoint the incumbent governors were few, and the unlucky ones were either openly disloyal, which was intolerable from the Kremlin's electoral angle, or utterly inefficient, which also questioned their ability to deliver the vote. Most governors survived. Moreover, the authoritarian nature of their leadership became much better articulated (Sharafutdinova 2010). This came as no surprise. Now the political monopoly of the governors on executive decision-making had to be combined with the political monopoly of United Russia on the legislative process.

Therefore, the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections, even if doubtful from a constitutional point of view (Pomeranz 2009), did resolve the problems confronted by the federal centre after the imposition of mixed electoral systems upon the regions. The Kremlin, however, moved further to eliminate not only the problem itself but also its manifestations of 2003 and early 2005. This resulted in a series of deteriorations of electoral legislation, and in several political measures. Below, these actions of the Kremlin are discussed, not in their chronological order of implementation (Lyubarev 2007), but rather in relation to the political tasks they were intended to achieve.

The tasks themselves were derived from the experience of mixed-system elections. Obviously, the greatest impediment to the electoral success of United Russia was the governors' ability to run the lists of electoral blocs with names appealing to the regional identities of the voters. This impediment was eliminated quite radically, for starting with the autumn of 2005, electoral blocs ceased to be allowed by law, but the governors sometimes chose to co-operate with minor parties too. For instance, in the October 2004 legislative elections in Irkutsk province not only United Russia but also the Agrarians (*Agrarnaya Partiya Rossii*) and the Socialist United Party of Russia (*Sotsialisticheskaya Edinaya Partiya Rossii*) were supported by the governor. Therefore, it was useful to create an institutional medium within which minor parties would be unlikely to survive. This was achieved by adopting, in December 2004, a new version of the law on political parties, according to which the membership requirement was raised from 10,000 to 50,000, and this requirement was extended both to the already existing parties and to new parties in the process of formation.<sup>3</sup> Of the 46

<sup>3</sup>Federal'nyi zakon ot 11 iyulya 2001 goda No 95-FZ 'O politicheskikh partiyakh', available at: [http://www.cikrf.ru/law/federal\\_law/2001\\_95fz.html](http://www.cikrf.ru/law/federal_law/2001_95fz.html), accessed 15 December 2010.

parties that were registered by December 2003, only 15 were still around by December 2007, and no new parties emerged between 2004 and 2007. Besides, minor parties were seriously damaged by a legal provision, introduced in July 2005, according to which the legal thresholds of representation in regional legislative elections were to be set at no more than 7% of the valid votes. While formally intended to arrest the unrestricted increase of the thresholds, in effect this provision led to the rapid shift of the regions from the 5% thresholds that were most widespread in 2003–2005 to 7%, a level scarcely achievable by the minor parties (Wilson 2009).

Another lesson derived by the ruling group from the interlude between 2003 and early 2005 was that short-term gains were unlikely to be achieved by means of institutional engineering. Fast solutions were to be political, directly aimed at the increased encroachment of the state in party politics (Oversloot & Verheul 2006; Gel'man 2008). Since most serious threats to United Russia were posed by the Motherland party and the RPP, they received the first blow from the Kremlin. The RPP was the early victim. Of the 12 elections held between October and December 2005, it nominated its lists of candidates in nine, but only two of them eventually ran. In seven, the lists of the party either failed to obtain registration or had their registration nullified after the start of the campaign. Normally, the official reasons for disqualifying the RPP from running in elections were formal and technical: that it violated its own statute when running a conference that nominated the list; the signatures presented to the regional electoral commission in support of the nomination were invalid; or the nominated candidates suddenly changed their mind and announced that they would not run, which disqualifyed the list as a whole. The political nature of this series of disqualifications, however, did not remain unnoticed, not only by informed observers but also by the party leaders. In December 2005, Valerii Gartung lost his leadership position, after which the RPP fell into a terminal decline. A similar fate was prepared by the Kremlin for the Motherland party. First it was disqualified from the elections to the Moscow city legislature in December 2005, which attracted quite a lot of national publicity, and then, without much attention from the media, it was ultimately demolished much in the same way as the RPP before. In the spring regional elections of 2006, only one of eight lists nominated by Motherland survived, after which Dmitrii Rogozin resigned. As for the Union of Right Forces, it was not directly attacked, but for some mysterious reasons it just ceased to run its own lists in regional legislative elections.

All these actions created a significant advantage for United Russia in elections held from October 2005 to March 2006. Indeed, the new and increased level of its success promised good prospects for the 2007 national election campaign (Wegren & Konitzer 2007). On average, it received 42.9% of the vote, the KPRF, 15.0%, the LDPR, 8.9%, and all other parties jointly, 24.8%. A relatively large share of the voters, 11.6% on average, still cast invalid votes or voted 'against all'. It is not surprising, then, that the next electoral reform was to eliminate the legal provision for voting 'against all', which came into effect at the end of 2006. Thus, United Russia not only regained the positions it had achieved in December 2003 but lost in the autumn of 2004, but it also took a step forward. This was not a decisive step, though: now it was a plurality party, but remained far short of an outright majority.

Meanwhile, the federal elections of 2007 were approaching, and the Kremlin wanted them to return an unquestionable pro-Putin majority. Probably this was part of the motivation for creating a second 'party of power' by merging the remnants of the Motherland party and the RPP with the Russian Party of Life (*Rossiiskaya Partiya Zhizni*), a previously unimportant formation led by the close associate of Putin, Sergei Mironov. There were expectations that the new entity, led by Mironov and named A Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*), would be able to split the voters of the KPRF, and even to replace it as the second largest party in the country without causing any serious harm to United Russia. Ideologically, therefore, A Just Russia committed itself to the left. At the same time, the process of building A Just Russia into a nationwide organisation included an important regional component, because in order to make it viable Mironov was allowed to recruit into his party those members of regional elites who, while possessing significant personal political resources, for this or that reason did not want to join United Russia or were rejected by it. This strategy, while obviously beneficial for the new party itself, proved to be risky for the ruling group as a whole.

The March and April 2007 regional elections, generally viewed as a wide-scale experiment with two parties of power, did not bring better results to United Russia. Its average share of the vote was 43.9%, which was almost the same as in the autumn of 2006. At the same time, the KPRF actually enhanced its performance, moving to 16.3%, and A Just Russia, with 15.3%, failed to claim second place, outperforming only the LDPR. It seemed that the very active campaigns waged by A Just Russia not only forged its own electorate, but also, by articulating discontent with the policies pursued by the governors and United Russia, mobilised left-leaning voters who ultimately decided to continue their support for the KPRF. Indeed, the opposition credentials of the KPRF were much better than those of the new party. In a different part of the ideological spectrum, the Union of Right Forces also seemed to benefit from the struggles between the two 'parties of power'.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the electoral statistics reported above with a moving average graphic representation. The data points on the figure represent averages (arithmetic means) of each of the represented variables for a chosen time period, which is, in this case, one year. The represented variables are the shares of the vote cast in regional legislative elections for United Russia and the second largest party throughout the period, the KPRF. This is the case for the December 2003 data-point average vote shares for the seven elections held in December 2003, the March 2004 data point, and for all 13 elections held to this point, but the December 2004 data point excludes the elections held in December 2003 and starts with March 2004 to include all 17 elections from March 2004 to December 2004. The principal advantage of the moving average figure is that it conveniently visualises the major point in my analysis of the 2003–2007 election outcomes: United Russia's level of success fell dramatically in autumn 2004 to be regained in the autumn of 2005. At the same time, the level of success of the KPRF remained steady throughout the period, which means that United Russia's temporary decline was beneficial to minor parties rather than to the communists. To make the figure reasonably readable, I do not represent the returns of the LDPR, but it has to be mentioned that its average level of support was also steady.

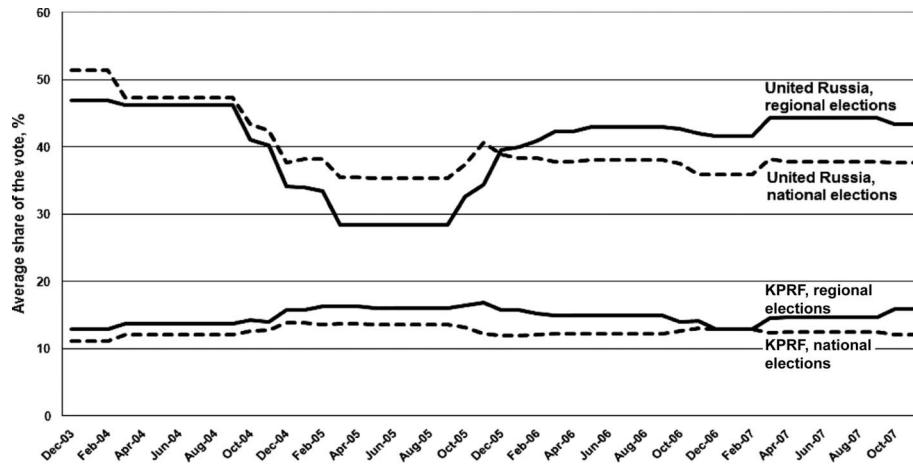


FIGURE 1. A SLIDING AVERAGE REPRESENTATION OF THE SHARES OF THE VOTE CAST FOR UNITED RUSSIA AND THE KPRF IN THE DECEMBER 2003–APRIL 2007 REGIONAL LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS AND IN THE DECEMBER 2003 NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

The moving average figure enables the resolution of a methodological problem not addressed above: what if the observed levels of party support are attributable not to the cross-temporal dynamics but rather to the cross-regional variation? This is why the figure contains information about the average shares of the vote received by United Russia and the KPRF in the 2003 national legislative elections in the same regions for which average local results are reported. As follows from the figure, to a certain extent the cross-regional variation argument holds. It is true that the December 2003–March 2004 regional elections were held in the regions with higher than average support for United Russia, which explains, if only partially, the sharpness of its decline in the autumn of 2004, and an element of its recovery in the autumn of 2005. However, starting with December 2005, the moving average of United Russia's vote in national elections remained steadily lower than in the regional ones. This means that the cross-temporal explanation holds independently of the cross-regional variation. It is noticeable that the last increase in United Russia's vote occurred in March 2007, but it was far less visible than the autumn 2004 upsurge.

Apparently, a repeat of the results of the March 2007 regional elections was not to be an acceptable outcome for the *Duma* elections that were due to be held in December 2007. The lesson for the Putin leadership was that there had to be only one 'party of power', United Russia, to claim an unquestionable victory and to emerge as a lasting base of Vladimir Putin's regime (Hale 2004; Remington 2008). Hence the decision of Vladimir Putin to join the list of United Russia, which made the rhetoric of A Just Russia, with its claims to be critical of United Russia but loyal to Putin, utterly irrelevant. Thus the 2007 *Duma* elections finalised the party system of electoral authoritarianism as a system with the 'party of power' at its core, supplemented by three minor formations represented in the parliament, the KPRF, the LDPR and A

Just Russia, and several extra-parliamentary formations doomed to gradual extinction.

### *Conclusion*

The major component of the system of electoral authoritarianism that took shape in Russia in 2005–2007 is restricted freedom of political association. As of July 2009, there were seven political parties that still had official registration. Obviously, however, it is not simply a matter of how many parties there are. Even a limited number of opposition parties could offer serious competition to United Russia, but only under two conditions: if they offer serious programmatic alternatives able to mobilise the voters, and if they can attract influential regional politicians to their ranks. None of the current parties met those conditions. Two of the three parties actually competing with United Russia on a more or less systematic basis—the KPRF and the LDPR—have a narrow appeal. The source of their core support is, respectively, archaic communist rhetoric and the personality of Vladimir Zhirinovsky. These parties cannot abandon these defining features without endangering their current position. The cost, however, is that they are unlikely to attract new voters. The third party, A Just Russia, has failed to develop a clearly defined ideological profile or a recognisable national leader. Originally, this party sought to attract influential local elites to its ranks. However, judging by its subsequent actions, the presidential administration has forbidden party leader Sergei Mironov from using this tactic further. Cutting A Just Russia's ties to the regional elite doomed the party to playing a marginal role in the regional electoral campaigns of 2007–2009. Thus, the circle of United Russia's competitors is limited to a small number of parties, each of which is focused on a narrow niche and does not seek a wide range of voters. Beyond the hardcore supporters of the communists and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, most Russian voters have reason to believe that there simply are no alternatives to United Russia. This situation deprives the elections of any political content, turning demonstrations of loyalty into the only possible rational approach to participation in elections.

The second essential component of the system of electoral authoritarianism, also finalised in 2005–2007 but rooted in the previous political history of Russia, is the political responsibility of the regional authorities for delivering the vote to the 'party of power'. Of course, the critical threshold in finalising this component was the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004. Since then, the presidential administration had made clear to the governors several times that their political survival as regional leaders depends directly on their ability to secure good results for United Russia in the elections. Governors who could not handle this basic task failed to win appointment to a new term or were fired before their term was up. Faced with such threats, the governors made serious attempts to fulfil the tasks set by the federal government. The presidential administration was the main body that defined these tasks. Before each campaign, it informed the governors what kind of results the Kremlin would consider acceptable. Information about these targets occasionally reaches the media. This evidence suggests that the governors usually carried out these instructions with a high degree of precision, while the role of United Russia in securing its own electoral success was at best limited. Rather than becoming a governing party, it remains the

federal government's tool of electoral and legislative control and, as Konitzer and Wegren (2006, p. 503) correctly argue, 'the central government's instrument for deepening and consolidating political centralization'.

How do the governors carry out these orders? The type of instruments available to regional leaders varies from place to place. In some cases, the results of regional elections have no relationship to the actual preferences of the voters—in other words, they are completely fabricated. A classic example of this type of voting is the elections to Ingushetia's Popular Assembly in March 2008. The announced results so obviously differed from the experience of the republic's residents that they led to mass demonstrations. Among the most recent elections, the March 2009 results from Kabardino-Balkariya apparently fit into this mould. The Central Electoral Commission published the preliminary results of these elections in approximately half of the voting precincts on its website only two hours after the end of the voting. These preliminary results varied little from the ultimate final results. As a rule, such speed in the electoral count indicates that the electoral commission prepared the protocols earlier, even before the elections took place.

On the basis of numerous, but episodic, facts, one can assume that falsifying electoral results to some degree takes place in the vast majority of regions. This level of cheating is not surprising considering that in recent years the regional administrations have gained complete control over the system of regional electoral commissions. Similarly, just as the governor bears personal responsibility for the result of the election before the presidential administration, within the regional administrations there are employees whose career prospects depend directly on the results of the elections. The chairmen of the electoral commissions, in turn, are responsible to these bureaucrats. Additionally, most of the rank-and-file workers in the electoral commissions depend on the income they derive from the elections. This well functioning hierarchy in many cases explains the election results. However, direct falsification is not the main factor in most regions. Often, there is no need for it. Also, it is not the optimal method from the point of view of the Russian authorities, although they do not consider it unacceptable. The most important thing is that United Russia wins in the elections. In conditions in which the elections are deprived of political meaning and the main alternatives only appeal to a narrow slice of potential voters, one must do only two things to win the elections: maintain their de-politicised character during the entire electoral campaign and create significant stimuli for the voters to go to the polls to demonstrate their loyalty to the authorities (Golosov 2009).

In the system of electoral authoritarianism, elections are politically meaningless. This is the major outcome of the political transformation undergone by Russia in 2005–2007. This transformation resulted from the fundamental inability of the Russian leadership to combine the tasks of nation-state building and democratic-institution building. The general contours of such a combination were already visible in some of the reforms of the first half of the 2000s, but they were abandoned by the ruling group for the sake of its own political survival. When it became clear that democracy was risky, not only for the regional elites but also for the narrow ruling group centred around Vladimir Putin, this group retreated into authoritarian ways. The strategy of democratic institution building was therefore replaced with a strategy

aimed at incorporating regional authoritarianism into the structure of the national authoritarian power. This strategy, while seemingly restrictive towards the regions, was effectively a compromise between the federal centre and the regional elites who received confirmation and even reinforcement of their control over the regions in exchange for political loyalty in the issues of national importance and, especially, for delivering the vote in national elections. This is the reason why centre–periphery relations lie at the core of electoral authoritarianism in Russia.

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